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The State of Language in Mexico

Official language policies have a tremendous impact on the language maintenance and shift of indigenous populations within a given nation. In this paper I will discuss the language situation in Mexico, and how the actions of the Mexican federal government impact it. Overall, the indigenous languages of Mexico are in danger of extinction with few, fragmented communities speaking the native languages. The population of speakers of native languages is declining, with Spanish-only speakers outnumbering bilingual and native-only speakers. The importance of maintaining the native languages is often overlooked, with people looking to English as their second language of choice. The recent push for bilingual education has been too mismanaged to be effective, and misinterpreted by native communities.

Mexico has a population of over 120 million people. Of this, 60% are of the mestizo ethnic group (Spanish and Amerindian ethnicities). 30% are solely Amerindian. 93% of the population speaks only Spanish. This is hugely disproportionate considering almost a third are ethnically indigenous. Only 5.7% are bilingual in Spanish and a native language and even fewer (0.8%) are speakers of the indigenous language only (CIA World Factbook). These numbers clearly indicate the overwhelming prevalence of Spanish and demonstrates the typical situation in which a colonial language completely dominates while nearly eradicating the native language(s). The Ethnologue lists 282 living languages in Mexico. Of the living languages, 1 is institutional, 87 are developing, 75 are vigorous and 32 are dying. The Mexican government recognizes 62 indigenous languages. Nahuatl is the largest, with over a million speakers, but some languages,

such as Ayapenaco, have only a handful of elderly speakers. “During the twentieth century the indigenous population, measured as speakers of the 62 surviving languages by the Mexican national census, has grown steadily in absolute numbers, but declined as a percentage of the total population from 2.2 million in 1930 (16%) to 7.2 million (7.2%) in 2000” (Hamel 301).

Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1810. The focus of the newly implemented government became unifying the people and instilling a strong sense of nationalism. Although independent from Spain, the European influence and prominent role of Roman Catholicism had left its mark and created an effort to “civilize” the native people and quash regional language, culture and religion. Recently, there has been a reinterpretation of national identity that shines a light on the indigenous roots of the Mexican people. An amendment to the Mexican Constitution in 1992 officially recognizes the pre-Colonial cultural history of the nation, declaring Mexico to be a pluricultural nation. The constitution states, “based originally on its indigenous tribes which are those that are descendants of the people that lived in the current territory of the country at the beginning of the colonization and that preserve their own social, economic, cultural, political institutions.” There is no official language for Mexico, but Spanish acts as the de-facto official language and is used in all government, media, professional and educational contexts.

With this increased sensitivity to indigenous groups came the implementation of bilingual education systems. However, there were numerous problems with the implementation, some of which continue to this day. Firstly, the years of conditioning communities to consider only Spanish to be of value made it difficult to sell the idea of educating children in their mother tongues. “After having convinced their communities that teaching Spanish is the most advantageous educational course for their children, they now have to counteract the effects of the integrative policy. By the time the new policy directives trickle down from the capital through

the state Offices of Education to the individual teachers in indigenous areas, the bilingual and bicultural thrust of the new policies is seen as either irrelevant or impractical, and the local community may actively oppose it" (Patthey-Chavez 207). Parents argued vociferously against bilingual schools, wanting instead to emphasize Spanish. Spanish was the societal language, after all, and was associated with personal and professional advancement. "Within the Mexican language ecology, the increasing vitality of Spanish has unfortunate consequences for indigenous languages which are becoming increasingly fragmented into isolated communities" (Hanna 7). In addition, if a second language was proposed to be taught in primary or secondary schools, English was considered much more valuable. This brings into focus the second major issue with bilingual education in Mexico. With the United States being the closest developed nation to Mexico, and with English functioning increasingly as the lingua franca of the world, people preferred to learn it rather than regional languages that had limited economic value.

Numerous internal issues exist within the bilingual education system in Mexico and the larger education system as a whole, particularly in its relationship with the government. The dominance of Spanish and English act as long-standing external obstacles, while the internal issues exist within the framework of the government. The education system of Mexico is very centralized in the capital, with mandates being filtered down to the state and regional level. There is a considerable lag between initial issuing of instruction and implementation, so rapid changes in response to conflicts are not possible. Additionally, a traditional teaching system is embraced and doesn't leave a lot of room for accommodating the needs of a specific community. Many of the bilingual school are assimilative in nature, and act contrary to the constitution's self-definition as a pluricultural nation. The schools aim to integrate indigenous children into the majority mestizo culture (Despagne 117). The regional differences of indigenous languages do

not seem to factor in to deployment decisions either. Teachers are sent to regional schools regardless of which indigenous language they speak and how it relates to the local language, or whether they speak an indigenous language at all. Instruction is often stilted and follows textbooks without integrating the learning of the language into the useful, day-to-day contexts the children are used to hearing the language in.

Finally, indigenous populations face socio-economic obstacles that limit opportunities to learn and preserve their mother tongues. "25.4% of the total Mexican population over the age of 15 is illiterate, and 8.4% do not attend school between the ages of 6 and 14.8 It is a safe bet that many of those in the last two categories are indigenous" (Cambronne 4). A holdover of the days of colonization was a prejudice against indigenous people and a lack of concern for the preservation of their culture and language. Moving to the city and increasing your social standing was considered more important, so learning rudimentary Spanish outranked developing native tongues for many people. Public resources were limited due to social and political unrest through the years, so, in addition to societal prejudice, the education of indigenous groups was neglected (Cambronne 10).

The state of language in Mexico is an interesting juxtaposition of stated purpose and practical implementation. On one hand, the government seems to be making a concerted effort to embrace their rich cultural heritage from pre-colonial days. However, numerous societal, local and global obstacles, as well as many years of social conditioning, are making this challenging. The bilingual schools have shortcomings in their approach to preserving native languages, with some schools operating under the directive to assimilate indigenous children into a Spanish-speaking, mestizo society. As globalization continues to influence Mexico, it will be interesting to see how the government works to preserve the cultural heritage of the nation.

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